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AUTHOR Ada, Alma Flor
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ABSTRACT

Many of the institutions that have helped children deal with the challenge of growing up, such as small towns and extended families, are disappearing or changing, and as a consequence schools are faced with greater responsibilities. Educators must reexamine what they do to acknowledge and validate the home and family, and must extend the educational process beyond the classroom. This is especially important for language minority and economically disadvantaged students. Educators can foster the student's first language as the vehicle for healthy home interaction, validate the informal education of language minority parents, and encourage children to communicate daily school experiences with their parents. The ultimate goal of these practices is for students and parents to recognize themselves as the authors of their own lives. (JP)

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A Critical Pedagogy Approach to Fostering the Home-School Connection

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by **Alma flor Ada**

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Bilingual educators, from the early efforts of the late 60's to the present, have maintained a steadfast commitment to serve children, and a determination to find the best means to do so. We have come a long way in many areas: the preparation of bilingual teachers, the design of model programs, the development of curricula and the production of educational materials. Research has proven, over and over again, the value of additive bilingualism.

Of course, as our commitment to bilingual education develops and deepens, we find ourselves needing to further our analysis and to add new dimensions to our concerns. It is not enough that we defend the right of children to be educated in their home language, or the bilingual aspect of bilingual education. We also need to look at the educational aspect of bilingual education as well. This is what will be addressed in this paper. And, while I am an outspoken advocate of bilingual education, the educational concerns and suggestions offered here are applicable to any classroom.

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Life today is very difficult for many of us, and especially so for children. Even in the midst of our own wealthy and highly technological society, we still do not adequately protect all children from abuse and mistreatment, frorm poverty, from early unwanted pregnancies, from life-threatening diseases. Within the confines of the home, they are subject to bombardment by the violence on the TV screen, while racism, sexism, homophobia, linguicism, ageism and all the other isms, including materialism, consumerism and greed, are insidiously present in many of their social encounters.

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As our society becomes increasingly more complex and demanding, many of the societal institutions we depended on in the past to help children deal with the challenges of growing up- the small town, the closely knit

neighborhoods, the community organizations, the churches, the extended families - are disappearing or changing. As a consequence, schools are faced with greater responsibilities and bigger challenges.

The magnitude of these challenges surpasses what the school can directly assume. Yet that does not lessen the responsibility we have to help and protect children. While that may seem to be an insoluble contradiction, it has prompted many of us to begin looking differently at the role of education. Paradoxically, we need to begin by acknowledging the limitations of schooling, in order to then create new ways of teaching that have a more powerful effect in the lives of the children we teach. We need to begin by truly recognizing that children's lives are an integral whole, of which schooling is only a part; hopefully a meaningful and significant part, but still only a part of a greater whole .

If we believe that children need the support of their parents and family, if we believe that it is important that they be aware of and cherish their family history,if we believe that it is important that they communicate and discuss values and ideas with their families, we need to reexamine what we as educators are doing to acknowledge and validate the home and family. What are we, as educators, doing to ensure that there is indeed a vibrant interaction between parents and children, between families and young people?

If we are to facilitate the growth of our students as integrated persons, if we are to help them develop their full potentials, we need to have the educational process extend beyond the classroom and the school walls. Most importantly, we cannot allow the school to disenfranchise the family, as happens all too often in the case of language minority and economically disadvantaged students.

In a highly literate society such as the United States, we grant a great deal of prestige to the printed word in general and to books in particular. We also tend to hold formal education in high prestige; unfortunately in the process, traditional knowledge is often devalued.

Many language minority students come from homes in which their families believe that due to their own limited formal education, they have no significant role to play in their children's education. These parents have internalized the oppressive premise that schools own the rights to learning, and that therefore, if one has not had many years of schooling, or if one has been labeled "unsuccessful" in schools, one has little to contribute to education. Often these parents hold enormous respect for the school as an institution. They believe that teachers know best about the education of their children. Frequently, they come from countries with very rigid class structures, in which people from the lower socioeconomic strata have been taught to look up to those in positions of power. They have been taught to be humble and to respect those who are perceived by society to be intellectually superior.

When there is no ongoing contact between the school and the parents, and no authentic incorporation of the child's home and community into the curriculum, schools, whether consciously or unconsciously, perpetuate the idea that parents cannot contribute to their children's education. In fact, the children themselves come to believe that their parents have little to offer in this regard.

When children begin to discover the tremendous discrepancy between what the school proposes as accepted models of conduct and behavior, what the school chooses to present as curriculum content, and what they experience as life and reality at home and in their community, there cannot but

be a profound inner conflict. Since our society tends to present life as dichotomized between good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable, children in these circumstances are left with few options but to make tough, painful decisions about their families, their communities, their schools and their own identities. When the schools do not go to great lengths to affirm the value of and the respect due to the student's home cultures, when instead they unthinkingkly perpetuate the school's Eurocentric and middle-class biases, children whose home life does not reflect those biases experience strong conflicts. Schools organized around traditional pedagogies can be detrimental to human growth by insisting that there is only one way to do things, and discouraging any process of questioning or discovery that the students might initiate to explore the discrepancies which they perceive around them.

Students, even very young ones, can tell when the curriculum does not fully respect their home culture. Some weak efforts to pay lip service to pluralism only obscure the issue. The fact that the school does not acknowledge and value the learning and knowledge of the home culture has a detrimental effect upon students' appreciation of themselves as members of that home culture, and a negative effect on the image that they hold of their parents.

This, then, is an example of the process of analyzing what the "hidden curriculum" of the school is; what the underlying messages are that the schools convey about the relative power and importance of the different people and different cultures that compose the school community, and the larger community which the school is a part of.

Yet there is always some room for creative activity, even within the ever-present limitations and constraints. Schools do not have to remain

oppressive, especially when we analyze how it is that the oppression functions and then use our knowledge to influence the values which are promoted by the school.

When there is an authentic effort to include parents in the education of their children, administrators, teachers, students and parents themselves can come to realize that the parents or primary caretakers have a lifetime of learning. This knowledge includes values and traditions; it includes an extensive oral literature composed of legends, folktales, songs, poems, games and stories. It also includes practical every-day experiences and an awareness of the processes by which people interact and learn.

Throughout their lives, parents have developed an ability to know, an ability to learn and grow. They are capable of confronting new situations and making the best of them. They can enrich their children's lives on a daily basis by analyzing situations, providing examples, engaging in discussions, showing how to learn. But if they feel disenfranchised or if the children internalize that their parents are "less than" as a result their lack of English or lack of formal schooling, the potential of this rich interaction will be jeopardized or impeded.

This, then, is a plea to teachers, to administrators, to teacher educators, to curriculum and material developers, to ask themselves every day, in each educational act , in each lesson:

What am I doing to ensure the development of each students' first language, whether I can speak that language or not, as the vehicle for home interaction?

What am I doing to acknowledge the parents' lives, experiences, and knowledge and their ability to construct knowledge?

What am I doing to foster communication at home between parents and children?

What am I doing to use the printed word as a means of validating and celebrating parents?

What am I doing to encourage parents and students to act as agents of their own liberation?

As I reflect further upon these questions, I will present some ways that they can be addressed in practice. While each question will be examined individually here, in actual practice there are many interrelationships: the activities we choose to meet any one of these needs will tend to support the others as well.

Developing the student's first language as the vehicle for home interaction.

We know that most children growing up in the U.S. tend to internalize very early the awareness that any language other than English has a secondary, non- acceptable status. As a consequence, children often internalize feelings of shame and rejection of their first language. But their first language is precisely the language of their home, their parents, their family. The possibility of the child having a healthy interaction with his or her family is affected by the child's mastery of the language the parents feel most comfortable using.

It is not enough for school to offer a bilingual program. It is not enough for teachers to say to children that their language is beautiful, or that it is better to know two languages than one. Language does not only need to be accepted. It needs to be explored, expanded, celebrated. It is not acceptable to pretend that a given dialectal or regional form is "more acceptable" than another; when we do so, we impose language criteria that contribute to disempowering parents.

We need to embark upon a journey of learning and discovery for all of us - since all of us, regardless which language or languages we speak, can increase and enrich our own knowledge of language. The exploration of language is a journey that our students and their parents can undertake with us, but one in which they also need to be acknowledged and respected as the teachers of their own particular vernacular, as knowers of their own individual usages and needs. Classroom-made dictionaries and lexical charts, classroom compilations of sayings and regionalisms, classroom collections of proverbs, riddles, and songs provided by family and community,

are some examples of how this multiple exploration of language can be carried out in the classroom. Of course the respect due the parents' language does not hinder students' learning other languages, nor academic dialects of the same language.

At the school, district or state level, the message will not be clear until we secure the right of every student who speaks a home language other than English to receive advanced placement and high school or college credit for that knowledge from the moment they enter school. Doesn't a six year old who has been raised speaking a language other than English speak more of that language than a first-year student taking that language as foreign language in college? Why should one obtain credit and not the other? Is it because schools retain the monopoly on knowledge?

This is not a far-fetched idea. If we do not denounce and seek to dismantle these double standards, what messages are we giving the students?

We also need to reconsider the voluntary-enrollment nature of bilingual programs. We frequently hear the complaint that parents don't want their children in bilingual programs. But do we ask ourselves what message we - the educators, the experts - give the parents, when we put the burden of the decision of whether their children should be in bilingual programs or not on them? We do not give parents any other curricular choices of this kind. No one asks parents whether they want their children enrolled in math class or not; why do we ask them whether their children should be in bilingual classes or not? What are we telling parents when we do that?

And finally, how do we want children to love and respect the language of their parents when the whole emphasis of so many bilingual programs is on "exiting" the children, on "transition them out" as soon as possible? If something is good and beneficial, we don't promote abandoning it. First

language development is the only academic area (because we must not forget that what is "home language" to one child is a "foreign language" deserving college credit to another), the only academic area that students are encouraged to forget and abandon.

Even though I know nothing of jurisprudence, it seems to be a matter of simple justice that as long as language skills merit academic credit, as long as language skills are important criteria for admission to prestigious universities, as long as language skills have a marketable value, districts which encourage abandoning and losing those skills should be liable for having harmed the students in their care. And these are issues educators and parents should jointly explore.

The Curriculum Connection: Parents as Constructors of Knowledge

One of the most disempowering and disenfranchising aspects of contemporary technological society is the emphasis on knowledge as a commodity. Through the process of schooling this knowledge is purchased or acquired by some people and thus becomes their private property.

To maintain the "market value" of school-generated knowledge, there is a generalized devaluing of the kind of knowledge which arises from the experiences, lives and reasoning of people. For example, introspection as a way of knowing is very much de-emphasized and undervalued. Students are not asked to reflect upon what they already know, nor to ask themselves what they can know with the resources they have available.

As individuals go through the schooling process, validity is attached only to learning and knowledge that has been written in books and presented

by recognized authorities. In the classroom, teachers often perpetuate the attitude that some forms of knowledge are more valid than others, and other societal forces do the same. Meanwhile, people in positions of power continually seek sources which appear legitimate in order to back up their own opinions and attitudes, and to support the beliefs that they themselves want to perpetuate.

The result is that people who come from the disenfranchised classes, people who have not had an opportunity for schooling, or only limited opportunities, will tend to devalue their own knowledge and even their own language. They will tend think that they are ignorant, that they don't know anything. Frequently they arrive at the false conclusion that not only do they not know, but that they are incapable of knowing. The ensuing low self-esteem further perpetuates a feeling of insecurity towards schooling along with a sense of helplessness.

Since students identify strongly with their parents, families and communities, they also might tend to perceive themselves as people without access to knowledge, without the ability to know, without the right to know. Therefore, many of them will tend to give up on schooling. Even if they continue to attend school, often they will not truly believe that they are a part of the learning process. This is an experience that has been voiced by many people from disenfranchised groups. They attest to the fact that while in school they always felt that the process or product belonged to the rest of population, but not to them. They felt that the teacher was addressing the other students but somehow not addressing them. In the case of language minority students, the mere fact that instruction takes place in a language other than that of their parents, and that the language of their parents is seen as less valuable than English, increases these feelings of alienation.

In other cases, some children become intrigued by the educational process. They somehow develop a sense that they can indeed learn and become successful in school. This interest is more likely to develop if the teacher fosters the belief in the potential of all students. We need to make sure, however, that these students do not as a result end up looking down at their families nor feeling embarrassed that their parents do not have the kind of knowledge that is acquired in schools. There is a real possibility that the children's internalization of the school's values can cause them to feel estranged from their family and ashamed of their heritage. We should be particularly concerned about children who seek to distance themselves from their families. Often unconsciously, these children begin to reject their home language, Anglicize their names, and disassociate themselves from any cultural identifiers. This rejection of one's ethnic identity, family and culture is damaging to students, regardless of the fact that they may be getting good grades. In spite of an external appearance of success, the loss of these student's identities as proud members of their communities of origin is an unneccesarily high price to pay.

In order to avoid having students feel rejected by schools, or feeling pressured to reject their own culture, we need to find a way to bring the two worlds closer together. One of the best means to do so is for the schools to validate the informal education that all parents have. Parents can be encouraged to understand that, regarless of their level of schooling, they have graduated from the most demanding university of all, the university of life. For many language minority parents, the story of their life in the United States is the story of overcoming many difficult obstacles. They are experts in the field of the struggles that they have faced in their lives, and of their own personal histories. We must begin to counteract the pervasive societal forces

that disenfranchise people by qualifying knowledge as private property belonging only to some and not to others. But in order to do so, it is not enough to just to say these words to parents. It is much more effective to demonstrate these ideas on a daily basis, in a multitude of ways, throughout the entire academic year.

The purpose, then is to conceive of projects in which the knowledge that the parents already have or can generate and reflect upon will be valued by the class and will become an integral part of the curriculum. All parents have a wide repertoire of stories and anecdotes about events that have happened throughout their lives. Teachers can encourage students to ask parents about their childhood and their process of growing up. What was life like when they were young? How was it different from how it is today? What lessons about life have they learned from their experiences?

Parents can also be asked to talk about their work. What happens in their work and how is it useful? How is it regulated and organized? Who controls it? How does it contribute to the well-being of society? Farm workers can talk about agriculture and the work in the fields. And immigrant parents can be asked to talk about their lives, which reflect both the history of this country and the histories of their country of origin.

When carried out with sincere respect and appreciation, these kinds of activities model the belief for parents that they themselves possess valid forms of knowledge. As a result, students will appreciate their parents as a source of knowledge and information, and parents will begin to see themselves in the same light, as their life experience is acknowledged and valued.

Facilitating Communication in the Home

Communication in the home today is surprisingly limited. National studies indicate that (on a statistical basis) the time parents spend in direct meaningful conversation with their children can be as little as three minutes a day for the mother and less than a minute per day for the father. Of course, there are many factors at work here. Many children live in a one-parent family with a mother who is struggling very hard to make ends meet. Even in two-parent homes, most parents are overworked, underpaid, and frequently live far from their jobs. But while it is essential to analyze these social conditions and struggle to change them, the question remains. What can we begin to do now, with the parents of the students who are in our care,in order to foster more communication between parents and children?

If children at every grade level are encouraged to return home daily with something to share with their parents and/or questions to ask of them, communication at home is bound to increase. And if the information requested from the parents encourages them to revisit their own childhood, they will in the process develop a greater understanding of their own children. Inviting parents to share childhood memories with their children thus not only provides a framework for communication, but also promotes better parenting.

Every day, children could take home an extension of the whole language activities of the classroom. Just as we ask children to predict the content of a book we are going to read to them - from the title, the cover, the name of the characters, or the first paragraph - we can ask children to invite their parents to offer similar predictions. Just as we engage children in writing a sequel to a story, we can invite them to retell a story to their parents and then ask for the parent's sequel. If we have a classroom discussion of a given topic, say friendship, we can have the children ask their parents to share with them the name of a childhood friend, what kinds of games they played

together, how they resolved mutual conflicts. Or we can ask the children to bring back a word from their parents that represents friendship, or have the parents complete a sentence " Friendhip is ...."

When we take the contributions offered by the parents, record them on charts, or collect them in classroom books, we show our interest in and appreciation of the parent's thoughts and experiences, and thus encourage children to continue asking for their parent's input and perspectives.

And in encouraging parent - child interaction, we are of course also facilitating the maintenance and development of the home language. We emphasize to children that they can talk with their parents and obtain information in the home language. Later, they will bring that information to class, either in the home language or in English, depending on our own ability to understand the home language. Thus, we are simultaneously encouraging the use of the home language as a valuable resource, validating the parents as important sources of knowledge and experience, and fostering greater comunication in the family.

It is important for me to re-emphasize here my conviction that all teachers, regardless of ethnicity or language skills, can function as powerful allies for children and their families by providing strong support for the above-mentioned goals. Of course it is essential for children to have strong role models of their own ethnic heritage, and of course it is vital for them to have their home language validated by being used in the schools and in other locii of social prestige. Yet teachers who have true respect and appreciation for their students' lives, families, and cultures can as a consequence be of benefit to their students, even when they don't share the same ethnic heritage, and even when they do not speak the student's home language.

While it is ideal for the home language to be used in the classroom, all

of the activities described here can take place at home in the home language, and their results shared in the classroom in English. In this way, the home language can be validated and encouraged, the parents' lives and experiences valued, and family communication developed and fostered, regardless of the teacher's linguistic repertoire or circumstances of birth. What is important, in all circumstances, is the teacher's integrity and commitment.

Parents and Children as Coauthors

Many children come to school without the advantage of a literate home environment. Many families cannot afford to own books, nor have they had much experience with writing them. Yet upon entering school, children are immersed in a highly literate world. Books are prestigious instruments in schooling. They are presented as the storehouses of knowledge and the primary tools for learning.

In many language minority homes, the storehouses of knowledge are the elders of the community, and knowledge is transmitted orally. Imagine the thoughts of a child whose parents seldom write, do not read, and perhaps cannot afford to buy books. When the child enters school, the subliminal message is "books are the repository of knowledge". It is all too easy for the child to conclude that "since my parents do not write, read, nor own books, they must not be part of the repository of knowledge."

Schools have traditionally placed much more emphasis in fostering reading abilities -- which imply a passive and receptive acceptance of the ideas presented by others -- that on writing abilities, which imply the active projection of one's own thoughts. While most of us have been encouraged to read many books, very seldom have we been encouraged to write one.

One way to help children integrate the two worlds of home and school, is by having the children write books in which they and their parents are the protagonists. Extending the ideas we have been developing even further, the children and parents can participate jointly in co-authoring a book on a subject of mutual interest.

A book need not be reproduced a thousand times in order to earn status and respect. Parents and children (with the help of the teacher) can publish one or several copies of a book on a topic that is important to them.

Writing a book together allows parents and children to learn about each other's worlds. It provides an opportunity for children to have a greater sense of their own identity through self-reflection and sharing their insights with their parents. It is also an excellent opportunity to have parents to share insights, thoughts and childhood experiences. Through engaging in the process of co-authoring a book, parents and children have a chance to share moments of mutual understanding which might not otherwise take place.

Children can also author books in which they are the protagonists, using information they have first obtained from their parents, for example: "How I got my name' "My autobiography" "The day I was born" or "Something big that happened when I was little". Or they can interview parents and dialogue with them in order to write books in which their parents are the protagonists; for example, "My father's (mother's) childhood friends", "To make the world a better place, my mother (father) suggests..."\ "A day that changed my father" (mother's) life..." "My mother's (father's) best advice for life."

Engaging in the process of producing a book will give parents, children, and teachers a feeling of empowerment and accomplishment. As the spoken word is given permanence, it takes on greater meaning.

These kinds of activities are not costly. They require no outside assistance nor special permission, and all parents and children can participate. And it is important to realize that these activities are not meant as something to add to the existing curriculum as an extra burden on the teachers. Our hope is that teachers will discover that these activities can become a major and integral part of the curriculum, that allows for the development of basic skills by providing a project that captures the interest of both students and parents.

Teachers can best encourage this activity by modeling it themselves. Sharing one's personal stories involves a certain amount of risk. If children and their families see the teacher take that risk first, writing a book about his or her own life, family, or children, and sendin\g the book home with the students so that they can share it with their families, the students and their parents are more likely to open up and share their personal stories as well.

For a teacher to model this process is not neccesarily easy, but certainly worthwhile. Teachers at the conference spoke about how, in the process of reclaiming their own voices as authors, they were discovering the ways in which they had been silenced, in which their own attempts at writing had not been validated in the process of their schooling, and how they themselves had not been acknowledged as writers.

At the conference, teachers who had been presented with these ideas at the previous year's conference reported that they had, in the interim, begun the process of applying these ideas into practice. They had written books themselves, shared the books with their student's families, and succesfully encouraged the parents and children to begin writing books of their own that reflected their lives, their histories, and their experience. The teachers also stated that the suggestions included here had been useful to them as a

concrete way to begin a process which had then branched out in different ways, depending on their particular circumstances and interests.

As parents and children engage in writing books of their own, the process of producing a book is demystified. Perhaps one day they will conceive and produce their own books, independently of the classroom. Writing from their own life experinece contributes to and strengthens parents and children's self-esteem and self-identity. This is an example of what is meant by "finding one's own voice". Having someone to listen to us, someone who believes that we have something worthwhile to say, is fundamental to that process. And the more that our experience is denied or deemed worthless by others, the more important it is that one experience what it is like to truly be heard.

No one becomes an author unless they feel that they have something significant and valuable to say. Teachers need to communicate to children and parents that their stories and voices are important and meaningful. By producing books, we provide a constant validation of the parents' thinking, language and history. Thus parents are helped to realize the valuable role they have as educators and teachers of their children. They are encouraged to recognize that regardless of their own level of schooling, they have important contributions to make to their children and to the learning process. They are persuaded by our actions that their personal history is important and worth sharing. In many instances they might have painful memories and scars connected with their school experience. It will be extremely significant for them to discover that the school values and recognized what they have to say.

Teachers, parents and children as agents of their own

liberation

As we were all reminded in the discussions at the conference, for the ideas presented here to have an authentic value, the ultimate goal of all these practices must not be forgotten. What we have presented here are not activities to be carried out for activity's sake, nor for the sake of the final material product. Our aim is not to have a lot of "cute family books" to show and tell, but instead for students and parents to recognize themselves as the authors not merely of books and texts, but of their own lives; to recognize themselves as protagonists not only of the stories of their past but also of their present-day struggle.

We want parents and students to be able to analyze their reality, to understand the structures and forces that constrain them, to feel strong enough to question the world around them, and free enough to engage in solidarity with others in order to shape and transform that world. In order for our work to have a meaningful effect, we need to constantly be present to the purpose behind what we are doing. We need to adapt the activities and undertake them in a way that is authentic and meaningful to us, in order that they might be authentic and meaningful for the parents and families. We need to be aware of our own attitudes and assumptions, in order for us to not be paternalistic towards the parents we are working with, but can instead communcate a deep respect for who they are. And we need to model ourselves the kind of risk-taking and growth that we want to facilitate in others.

As educators who practice this kind of education, we invite you to join us in the process of discovering our own inner strength and freedom as we witness the transformative energy that arises from affirming the human power and potential present in everyone.